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Polysemous Approach to Be in English

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A Polysemous Approach to *Be* in English

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In this report, I argue that it is reasonable and necessary to postulate two different sorts of copular *be* 's in order to properly describe and account for the grammatical phenomena that copular sentences display, relying largely on the data that Declerck (1988) offers. Copular sentences divide into two major types: the predicational (henceforth PR) sentence and the specificational (henceforth SP) sentence (cf. Higgins (1979)). I argue that the difference between the two types of sentences is reducible to the heterogeneity of copular *be* (cf. Halliday (1967)). The two types of sentences in question are exemplified in (1):

- (1) a. John is a teacher. (PR sentence)
- b. The winner was John. (SP sentence)

The major difference between the two is in the referentiality that complement NPs carry. PR sentences take nonreferential NPs as complements and SP sentences referential NPs as complements. NP complements of PR sentences can be coordinated with AP complements, but those of SP sentences cannot:

- (2) a. He is a teacher and highly competent.
- b. *That woman is very famous and Bella Abzug.

SP sentences are reversible, but PR sentences are not:

- (3) a. *A teacher is John.
- b. John was the winner.

These facts lead us to the claim that *be* in PR sentences is different in kind from *be* in SP sentences. We call the two kinds of *be*'s PR *be* and SP *be*, respectively.

We can cite two arguments in support of our claim here. The first is concerned with subject selection of copular *be*. Subject NPs in PR sentences are marked by personal pronouns, but those of SP sentences are marked by *it*.

- (4) a. John is a teacher, isn't {he/*it}?
- b. The guest was Bob, wasn't {??he/ it}?

This difference in pronominal marking follows naturally from the selectional differences between the two copula *be*'s, as formulated in (5).

- (5) a. PR *be* selects referential subjects.
- b. SP *be* selects impersonal subjects.

The second argument can be illustrated by verbal agreement phenomena.

SP sentences contrast with PR sentences clearly in this respect. PR sentences like (6) display number concord between subject and complement NPs as a rule. In SP sentences, however, number discord between them may occur, as is in (7).

(6) Ed was {a lawyer/ *lawyers}.

(7) Our only guide was the stars.

The sentence in (7), for example, successfully corresponds to an *it*-cleft, as in (8):

(8) It was the stars that were our only guide.

Given that *it*-clefts match with SP sentences, but not PR sentences, it is evident that copular sentences with the word order $NP_{sg.}$ *is* $NP_{pl.}$ are SP sentences. It is now arguable that the number concord in (6) and the number discord in (7) are related to the difference between PR *be* and SP *be*, as stated as follows:

(9) a. PR *be* is oriented to agreement association.

b. SP *be* is oriented to agreement dissociation.

Pseudo-cleft sentences offer empirical support for this formulation. The fact that they are reversible undoubtedly shows that they are SP sentences.

(10) a. What I bought is a German shepherd and a St. Bernard.

b. A German shepherd and a St. Bernard is what I bought.

The agreement in singular in (10) illustrates the agreement dissociation of SP *be*. The two sets of formulations in (5) and (9) conspire to accommodate the number discord in (11), where impersonal *it* equals the plural complement *Mary and Joe*.

(11) Bill thinks the ones who voted for him were George and Alice, but I know {it was/ ?they were} Mary and Joe. (Gundel (1977))

This idiosyncratic number discord tests the validity of (5) and (9).

I hope I have been able to show that the reference to the two different meanings inherent in copular *be* is critical to the precise description of the phenomena under discussion. It remains to be seen whether the PR/SP contrast within *be* generalizes to other grammatical phenomena concerning *be*.

Selected References

- Declerck, R. (1988) *Studies on Copular Sentences, Clefts and Pseudo-clefts*, Leuven: Leuven University Press. / Gundel, J. (1977) "Where do cleft sentences come from?", *Lg.* 53. / Halliday, M.A.K. (1967) "Notes on transitivity and theme in English Part 2," *JL* 3. 2. / Higgins, R. (1979) *The Pseudo-cleft Constructions in English*, Garland Publishing, New York.